HOW AN ARCHÆOLOGIST BECAME A CRAFTSMAN AND DEVELOPED A NEW ART-INDUSTRY: BY EDWARD W. HOCKER

Mid the manifold forms of adornment employed in Pennsylvania’s magnificent new Capitol, at Harrisburg, not the least interesting is the Moravian tiling, stretching like a great rug through the corridors and across the rotunda. This tiling is the product of long years of experimenting by Henry C. Mercer, one of the foremost archæologists of Pennsylvania, who has sought to reproduce the best features of an ancient and almost forgotten art. In the new Capitol he has had an opportunity for the first time to develop his ideas upon an elaborate scale, and the result has elicited much warm commendation.

The chief point of distinction between the Moravian tiling and that which is in ordinary use is that in the former the mosaic is not formed of a large number of small squares, but comprises a limited number of units of clay of irregular form. The new tiling can best be likened to the stained glass window. The size and shape of each tile is determined by its position in the mosaic and by the color which it represents in the make-up of the entire design. As the bands of lead which join the fragments in the stained glass window are made to form part of the general effect, so in the tiling the cement joints enter prominently into the general scheme of the decoration, no attempt being made to minimize them, as in ordinary tiling.

The floor comprises a series of about four hundred plaques or mosaics, representing incidents typical of the history of Pennsylvania and the life of its inhabitants. To portray the work of the people rather than wars and treaties was Mr. Mercer’s aim. The various designs show Indians making fire, chipping arrow heads, paddling a canoe, smoking tobacco, cultivating corn; the colonists cutting down the forest, building a log cabin, spinning, weaving and cooking; then the discovery of coal, iron and petroleum, and the operation of the iron industries, oil wells, locomotives and various manufactures, and finally the telegraph, electric railway and automobile. Various kinds of trees, birds and animals found in the state are also depicted, and in several groups noted historical incidents that occurred in the state are portrayed.

These mosaics, most of which are about five feet in diameter, are made of clay colored in subdued tones of brown, yellow, red, green, gray and blue. The background is formed of small red tiles. There
MORAVIAN TILES

is no border or band of any kind as a framework. The dull-colored, rough pavement is rendered the more striking by reason of its contrast with the walls, which are of highly polished white marble.

Mr. Mercer evolved this new form of tile pavement as a consequence of his devotion to a hobby that beguiled long weeks of physical infirmity. He was formerly curator of the Archaeological Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, but was forced to give up that position because of sickness. He then retired to his home near Doylestown, about twenty-five miles from Philadelphia, and devoted himself leisurely to the collection of all manner of implements that had been used in America since the beginning of history. This collection he presented to the Bucks County Historical Society, whose museum is in Doylestown, and then he made a duplicate collection for his own home.

While gathering these relics of the past, he became interested in the pottery of the early German settlers of Pennsylvania, among whom were the Moravians. Formerly many small potteries were in operation in the rural districts of Eastern Pennsylvania, and a crude art was developed in the coloring and decorating of various homely utensils in use in every farmhouse. The land of the Pennsylvania Germans is famous for its pies, and the potters of this people strove to make their pie plates the most beautiful specimens of their craft. Apple-butter crocks, flower pots and many kinds of bowls and pans were made from the rich red clay that abounds in Bucks, Montgomery and Berks counties. Mottos and Biblical phrases were inscribed upon the pottery, and flowers, Biblical and historical scenes.

Besides the pottery, Mr. Mercer also made a thorough study of the old German stoves, which were ornamented in a manner similar to the pottery. These stoves consisted simply of five plates of cast iron, each two feet square.

As his collection grew, Mr. Mercer conceived the idea of developing the good features of this early German art, as exemplified in the pottery and the stoves, so that it might be useful today. After much search he found an old German at Rockhill, an isolated part of Bucks County, who still operated one of the ancient potteries. With him Mr. Mercer obtained work as a laborer and was employed at the pottery for several weeks, mastering all details of the craft as it was then conducted.

He found, however, that the art of producing the glazing and many of the remarkable color effects in red and yellow, for which
the old utensils were noted, seemed to have been lost. He there- 
fore built a pottery at his home and began to experiment for the 
reproduction of colors.

His efforts for a long time were without the desired results. Then 
he arranged to visit the potteries in the Black Forest of Germany 
and endeavor to learn the secret of their colors. He had already 
bought his ticket for the voyage when the very colors for which he 
had been seeking were unexpectedly produced in an entire kiln 
of tiles. Realizing that now he was on the right track, he cancelled 
the arrangements for the journey abroad, and he was soon able to 
color his tiles just as he desired.

Since then Mr. Mercer has devoted himself to art tile work. 
Eventually he sought inspiration for his designs not only from the 
ancient Pennsylvania German pottery and stove plates, but also 
from the tiles and pavements in the old abbeys and monasteries of 
England, Scotland and Ireland, as well as from the tiling of the 
Persians and Arabians and the various famous examples of this art 

In the course of his experiments, Mr. Mercer’s health broke 
down several times, and he was compelled to alternate periods of 
work with long intervals of rest. His studio and workshop are in 
a large and picturesque building on the lawn surrounding his home. 
There he delights to expound to his friends his theories of the use 
of clay in art. He admits that all has not been smooth sailing in his 
endeavor to disseminate his ideas, because his tiles are made by hand 
and therefore lack the perfect proportions of machine-made tiles; 
but this fact, he asserts, gives his work individuality.

Relative to the Capitol designs, Mr. Mercer said: “What the 
observer sees is in no sense a picture, but is always intended to be a 
decoration. The drawing is simplified to the last degree, so as to 
satisfy the clay process. The colors of men, animals and objects 
are fantastic and by no means realistic. The skies may be red, 
water black, trees yellow. It matters not. Is the meaning ex- 
pressed? Granted that the colors are harmonious. That is all 
we ask.”